Screwtape Writ Large: The Theology Behind Nefarious

by Bob Perry

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Steve Deace (pronounced 'Dace') is not a formally trained theologian. He started his career as a sports talk radio host in Des Moines, Iowa. But in 2003 his entire world got turned upside down when he attended a Promise Keepers rally and devoted his life to Christ. Since then, he has worked as a political consultant and talk show host, and he has become quite comfortable at mixing theology with cultural criticism. So much so that in 2016, he took it upon himself to, in his words, "pay homage to C. S. Lewis and his *Screwtape Letters*" by publishing his first book, *A Nefarious Plot*.

This summer, the adaptation of that book hit the big screen as *Nefarious*. It's an intense, low-action film with a high-impact message. A sardonically delivered glimpse into the demonic effort to take down an entire culture, *Nefarious* is *Screwtape* on steroids.

Assessing the Culture

Set almost entirely in a prison visiting area, the movie consists mostly of the dialogue between a psychiatrist and a convicted murderer, Edward Wayne Brady, who is due to be executed for his crimes. Brady, it turns out, has been the lifelong victim of a relentless demon who calls himself Nefarious. Brady's tortured soul breaks through on occasion, but it is Nefarious speaking through him who drives the conversation. And the conversation is a piercing critique of the current social climate.

The dialogue is clever. It includes culturally uncomfortable assessments of issues like euthanasia and abortion. The impact Nefarious and his cohorts are having on the world really hits home when the atheist psychiatrist begins making smug pronouncements about the apparent failure of the demons' mission, boasting:

> Your side's not doing too well. We've never been freer. Literacy is at an all-time high. We're working to eliminate racism, intolerance, and gender inequality. People can love who they want, be who they want, and do what they want. Diversity is no longer a dream. Hate speech is no longer tolerated. And politically, we're reclaiming the moral high ground.

Nefarious sneers back, "I think I love you." And then, with a taunting smile he continues:

> Literacy? The average high school graduate reads at a 6th grade level. You have basketball players making $30 million a year decrying racism all while wearing sneakers made from slave labor. And your world currently has 40 million slaves. That's more than the Romans had at the height of their empire. And one of the best parts is that roughly half of those are sex slaves. As for hate speech, you want to hear some irony? We didn't even come up with that one. You did it all by yourself … [But] abortion? We do that together.

Truth, Not Power

Addressing the topic of demons in his *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis famously quipped:

> There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.

Whatever one's theological stance on the possibility that a demon can take over a human being, it is hard to argue with the balance *Nefarious* strikes between these two extremes. The demon makes the case that what we call "possession" is nothing but a gradual and patient process; through a series of temptations that slowly increase in duration and intensity, the demonic realm can steer our decision-making, either individually or *en masse*. It's a process of gaining control, not by power, but by deflection from the truth.

This is exactly the point of the famous "spiritual warfare" passage in Ephesians 6. Paul's admonition there is not to pray for power to overcome the rulers, authorities, and powers of this dark world. Instead, he exhorts the Ephesians to first put on the "belt of truth." He tells them to ask for perseverance in the fight—to pray that he and those around him might speak the truth fearlessly.

Nothing New Under the Sun

If deception is at the heart of spiritual warfare, our society is a place where demonic deception and distraction are the only explanations for the corrupted thinking we see and hear around us every day. Normal, rational human beings could never come up with some of the ideas our culture accepts without question. The psychiatrist's proud defense of tolerance and social justice is a case in point. But it's nothing new. And the church is not immune to its enticements.

In one of his training sessions with his demon underling, Lewis's indomitable Screwtape lectures Wormwood on how to infuse unbiblical ideas into the Christian's life. His method may sound familiar. And remember, for Screwtape, the "Enemy" is God:

> We want men to treat Christianity as a means; preferably, of course, as a means to their own advancement, but, failing that, as a means to anything – *even to social justice*. The thing to do is to get a man first *to value social justice as a thing which the Enemy demands*, and then work him on to the stage at which *he values Christianity because it may produce social justice* …
> [I]t is quite easy to coax humans around this little corner. Only today I have found a passage in a Christian writer where he recommends his own version of Christianity on the ground that "only such a faith can outlast the death of old cultures and the birth of new civilizations." … You see the little rift? "*Believe this, not because it is true, but for some other reason."* That's the game …[1] (emphases added)

Lewis wrote those words in 1942. *Nefarious* simply echoes them back to us in 2023.

Change the Tune

Returning to the film, after the opening confrontation between the two interlocutors, the psychiatrist takes a break and walks away from the table where he and Nefarious have been sparring. When he sits back down, Nefarious challenges him, "Ready for round two?"

"I didn't know this was a fight," the psychiatrist replies.

Nefarious doesn't miss a beat. "That's why you're losing."

We can't disbelieve in the existence of the real-world demons Nefarious represents. But we must also remain fully aware that they have always been singing the same song. It's a tune they've hissed every day since that cool morning in the Garden of Eden. Nefarious gloats:

This is how the world ends. Not with a bang, or even a whimper. But with dad more interested in his fantasy football team than his kids. Mom sharing self-loathing S&M porn with the rest of her fellow desperate housewives. And the kids, at least the ones who weren't aborted, learning right from wrong through curriculum and pop culture often handpicked by us. You have become a sadistic symphony of destruction, and I am your conductor. My Master is your maestro.[2]

Our tone-deaf culture may be dancing to the wrong music. But those with ears to hear must be committed to changing the chorus—to singing from a hymnal that rings with the voice of Truth.